

# Problems of Waste Disposal Outlined

By WESLEY E. GILBERTSON P. E.  
 Chief, Office of Solid Wastes  
 U. S. Public Health Service

One of the most critical environmental health problems of present-day society, one whose solution will require great resources and imaginative thinking by members of the engineering community, is what to do with this nation's ever-increasing burden of solid wastes.

The very technological ingenuity that helped create our society and made it possible to produce and use things at an amazingly rapid rate, must now face the task of figuring out how to dispose of the fruits of our labor without endangering human health and well-being or drastically marring scenic beauty.

At the present time Americans are piling up some 800 million pounds of junk and refuse each day on their already overburdened trash

heaps. For centuries the prevailing practices of solid waste disposal have been to burn and bury, but with such mountainous daily volumes, these methods are no longer safe or acceptable.

ALTHOUGH burning and burying may succeed in removing unwanted articles from households, institutions and industries, they often produce massive environmental pollution and contamination. By establishing foul-smelling refuse dumps in our midst and scattering the countryside with junk, we contaminate the air we breathe, the ground we live on, and the water we drink and bathe in. And we create a fatid breeding ground of disease, crawling with rats, mice and vermin.

For the services of collection and disposal of solid wastes, Americans are paying an estimated \$3 billion each year in direct costs, a figure second in municipal expendi-

tures only to expenses for school and roads. The indirect costs, such as medical bills, the need for increased air and water pollution activities, and effects figure beyond reckoning. Application of newer and better methods of solid waste management will undoubtedly reduce these excessive costs, but most importantly, it can also remove major threats to our health and welfare.

We possess at the present time much of the technological ability needed to correct the situation, and it is the job of the engineer not only to play his traditional role of bringing scientific knowledge into practical application, but additionally to help society make critical decisions that will determine whether or not we are successful in meeting the solid waste problem.

THE RAPID growth of the solid waste problem, coupled with what it will increase to as the population expands and the per capita volume of wastes itself increases, has triggered an overwhelming response throughout the country. The Congress reacted by enacting legislation calling for a comprehensive national program of attack on the problem.

This legislation, the Solid Waste Disposal Act, led to creation of the Office of Solid Wastes in the Public Health Service, charged to assist local, state, and nonprofit private agencies in developing and demonstrating new methods for the collection, reduction and elimination of our solid wastes either by returning them harmlessly to the environment or bringing them back into the economy in ways that are not detrimental to man and his environment.

This task represents both a formidable engineering challenge and one that will require Herculean energies. Immense scientific acumen will

be required to develop practical and noninjurious methods for managing solid wastes, simply because the volume of these materials and their often hazardous nature defies the imagination.

CORRECTING the situation will require:

- Removing some 20 to 40 million automobile hulks now rusting in automobile graveyards throughout the country.
- Disposing of nearly 30 billion glass bottles and jars thrown away in this country every year.
- Discovering ways to reuse nondegradable wastes, such as plastics.
- Elimination or re-use of more than 20 billion pounds of paper and paperboard items that Americans discard

each year.

- Developing methods for coping with nearly 6 billion metal cans and containers that are discarded yearly in the United States.
- Processing millions of tons of sewage sludge that contaminates streams and rivers.
- Intercepting the enormous volume of industrial wastes that are presently poisoning the entire environment.

To an age that has all but immunized people against surprise at new technological achievement, it may be a painful reality that we are now plagued by the solid waste problem. The impact of this situation has been to arouse responsible persons to de-

mand of the engineering sciences new and bold approaches for the safe and salutary reduction, elimination, or recycling of wastes.

SINCE THE passage of the Solid Waste Disposal Act numerous projects throughout the country have received support from the Office of Solid Wastes. The ingenuity of some of the projects being considered actually turns the table on the problems posed by the threats inherent in many solid waste problems. In addition to avoiding and pre-

venting health, hazards, erosions of aesthetic values, and economic impairments, the solutions may make specific and tangible contributions to these very same fields.

In one project being supported by the Office of Solid Wastes, heat from incineration is being recovered to desalinate sea water, an age-old problem of man and one of increasing importance. This same project is eliminating the wastes in a manner that conforms to air pollution control requirements.

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